

The Greatest Gift

The Empty Tomb
John 20: 1-9

THE EASTER STORY

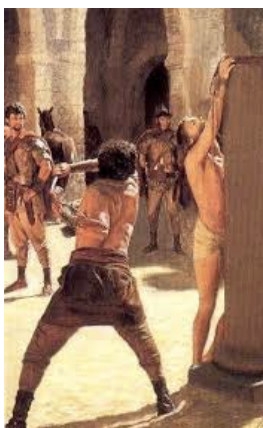
12 April 2020

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What does it look like to rise from the dead?

Jesus didn't stagger and stumble, bleary-eyed and numb from the coils of death; He rose as a conquering hero. And He strode out of the tomb like He owned the place. Because He does!

One night a man had a dream. He saw Jesus scourged unmercifully by a soldier. The pieces of metal tore into Jesus' flesh until his back was just a mass of raw meat. This was a typically-brutal Roman scourging. Mel Gibson portrayed it well in



The Passion of the Christ. Many people who experienced these scourging died from them. The man watched this horrific scene in his dream for several minutes. Finally he couldn't take it any longer. As the

soldier raised his arm for yet another strike, the dreamer rushed forward to try to stop him. At that moment the soldier turned around quickly, and the dreamer let out a scream when he saw his face - because the soldier's face was the dreamer. He was horrified.

The Easter Story is the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The only people who appreciate *THE GIFT* are those who understand the *NEED FOR THE GIFT!* The only people who appreciate deliverance (from sin or anything else) are those who understand their *need* for deliverance.

A true story was being told of the last days of WWII. Rumours were going around at Nazi extermination camps in Poland that Hitler had ordered the execution of all prisoners and the burning of all concentration camps. And so when these frightened, exhausted, emaciated men and women heard army tanks approached the compound on that particular day and begin to smash against the front gate, they prepared for death. They thought they were doomed. Until they saw their Liberator flag on the army tanks. They were not exterminated, but liberated!

Can you imagine how grateful they were at that moment? *In the midst of their suffering, they understood their need for deliverance, and they were elated when it finally came.*

The man who had the dream about the scourging of our Lord had a similar awareness of his need. The instant he saw that he was the soldier, he understood his need for deliverance: deliverance from his personal sins which were responsible, in part, for the sufferings that Jesus endured on Good Friday.

Reminiscent....



It all comes down to the *Empty Tomb* and the Resurrection - The faith of billions - rest on this singular event. The very first person to whom Jesus appeared on Easter

Sunday morning was a woman named Mary of Magdala. All four gospel writers agree that Mary Magdalen was the first bearer of the Good News.

(cf. Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1-2; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-18).

Why was Mary Magdalene first?

Would it have made more sense for the Risen Christ to appear to Peter, the Prince of the Apostles before He appeared to Mary Magdalen or anyone else?

The Bible tells us that our Lord had expelled seven demons from Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9; Luke 8:1-3). (Bible Commentators agreed that Mary Magdalen's problem was severe. In fact, the "seven" refers symbolically to "completeness." In that case Luke would be saying she was totally filled up with demons and highlighting the remarkable exorcism of Jesus towards Mary Magdalene).

Wouldn't we agree that Mary Magdalene was given this incredible privilege to be the first to witness the Risen Lord. The Master understood her need more than anyone else did – except, of course, for our Blessed Mother!

Jesus had delivered this woman and set her free from sin and the forces of evil that were destroying her life. And she knew that she needed to keep Jesus in her life in order to stay delivered. By the way, if Mary Magdalene was a Catholic today, that means she would be at Mass EVERY SINGLE DAY, because she recognized her great need for Jesus. *She remained faithful to him* – even when all the apostles had deserted the Lord.

So it was fitting that she was the first one to see Him risen from the dead. It was not a coincidence. The message of Easter is that Jesus Christ has won the decisive victory over sin and eternal death for Mary Magdalene and for each of us.

They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus. (John 20:13-15)



But the Lord did not "force" His victory on Mary Magdalen, nor will He "force" His victory on any one of us. If we want to experience the fruits of His redemptive act, then we have got to be like Mary Magdalene and come to Jesus, willing to **admit our great need for His mercy.**

Which means that we have got to be willing to **confront our personal sins!** *And not just some of them, but **all of them!*** The sins of lack of charity, the sins of unforgiveness, the sins of greed and materialism, the sins of impurity, of gossiping, slandering, adultery, addictions, etc.

Confronting our personal sins - is a radical one for those of us living in the early 21st century, when personal sin is frequently denied, and guilt is often looked upon as the worst thing in the world. Let's be clear about it: guilt is not the worst thing in the world! The worst thing in the world is the *denial* of sin. Because if we deny our sins, we cannot be forgiven by the Lord.

If we wish to experience the fruits of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, then our attitude must be like Mary Magdalene's or like John Newton's after his conversion.



But in your great mercy you did not put an end
to them or abandon them, for you are
a gracious and merciful God.

Nehemiah 9:31

Welcoming the Resurrection Gift of Peace

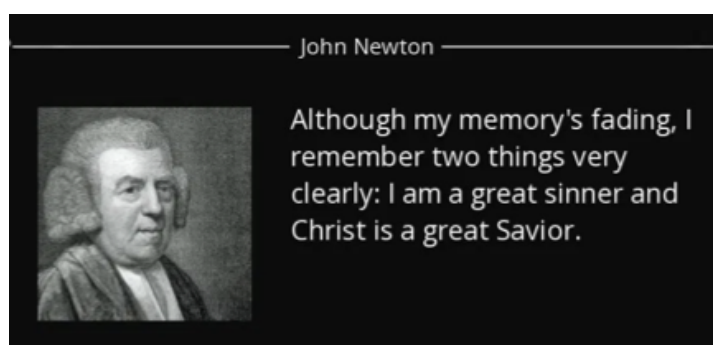
John Newton's ... Amazing Grace!

John Newton wrote a hymn that we sing in church all the time, "*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound...*"

Born in the early 18th century. His mother died when he was 7. His father was a sea captain and good Christian, but early on Newton rejected the faith his father had tried to instil in him. From age 17 to age 23, he travelled all over the world and got himself into all sorts of trouble. He led a promiscuous lifestyle; he was sold as a slave; then, when he escaped, he became a slave trader. He went through many difficult times.

And nothing ever motivated him to change for the better—until he almost died in a storm at sea. Then he finally cried out to God, as desperate people sometimes do. He promised the Lord that if he came out of the storm alive he will *CHANGE!* Unlike many others who make similar promises, Newton was true to his word. He had a Spiritual Conversion! Eventually became an Anglican minister and leader in the campaign for the abolition of slavery. That's when he wrote the iconic Christian hymn: ***Amazing Grace***. He wrote them out of his own experience of facing his sin and receiving new life in Christ.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found; was blind, but now I see." At age 82, he said, **"My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things, that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour."**



At Newton's gravestone, bearing his self-penned epitaph read:

“John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and libertine [playboy], a servant of slaves in Africa, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy.”

What is most striking about the epitaph is the honesty behind it. Newton was unafraid to admit to the world that he had been a scoundrel. He understood the Power of the Risen Christ to wash away those horrible sins of the past. ***Grace did not free him to serve no master, but a new Master!***

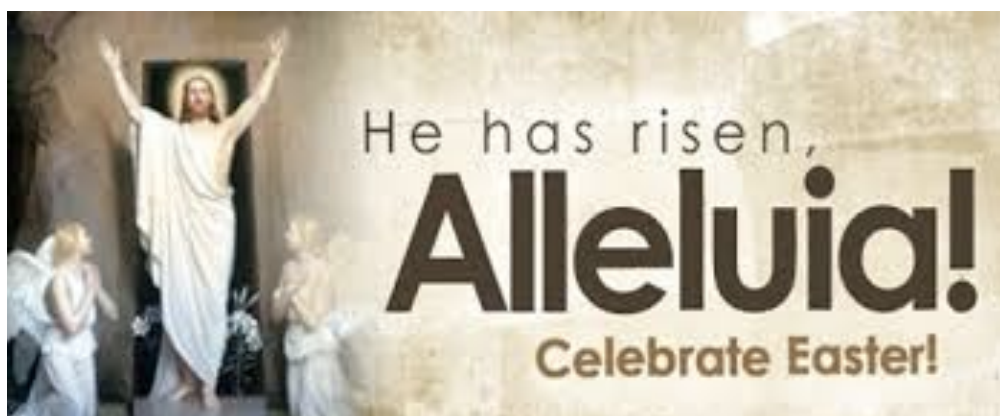
**What would you write on your epitaph?
How would you want to be remembered?**

“We remember how You loved us, to Your Death...”

(Lyrics for “We Remember...” by Marty Haugen; cf. Philippians 2:6-8)

This could well be written on Jesus' tombstone

The only people who appreciate the gift of new life that Jesus brings us by his Resurrection, are those who know how much they need the gift those who know their poverty, their imperfections, their sins, their need for healing. People like John Newton, people like Mary Magdalene - and, hopefully, people like you and me!



Darkness to Light

Holy Saturday...hush...silence...empty
Circuit breaker...heart breaker...a pity
Deserted streets...churches...all closed
Hearts wrenched...drenched...reposed

Crucified...GOD died...laid buried...
Mourned...saddened...they hurried
Some wander...others wonder
Is there hope...and light yonder

Faithful hearts...remain in prayer
Waiting...longing...we all dare
Darkness...beyond the tomb
GOD will rise...Light will bloom

From Despair...to Delight
Darkness... to Light
Mourning...to Rejoicing
Dying...to Living

All virus...bow before God
Banished...vanished...in His Time
The pain...the tears...the lot
The battle cry...victory will chime

Alleluia... Praises...sung
All gloom...doom...is dung
For the Risen One is here
Christ our Lord...comes to cheer!
A Holy Blessed Easter greets us here...



(Reflections on Holy Saturday: Veronica Nathan)